

# The Critical Importance of Information Literacy to a Reformed Educational Context in Afghanistan: A Case Study

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## **Abstract**

Nearly one quarter of a century of turmoil in Afghanistan has deprived a generation of Afghans of the personal benefits of education, benefits that might have contributed to critically needed national development. Education provides the underpinning for social, economic, and political development. Therefore, until educational services are restored, there is little hope for significant progress in Afghanistan. Perhaps even more important for the future of Afghans, education has the potential to provide a national unifying experience, allowing for a multi-ethnic, multi-racial, and multi-religious national culture to emerge that is respectful and tolerant of all of the diverse elements in Afghan society. It is timely therefore for Afghans to come together to develop a vision and specific goals and objectives for a reformed education system that can play a stabilising role in the country. Since Afghanistan, like all countries in the world, lives in the Internet Age, information literacy must place a key role in this vision of a modern and strengthened education system. This paper addresses the background of education in the country, and suggests an approach to ensure that information literacy is centrally positioned in a reformed educational vision.

This paper is organized into five parts. First, there is a section providing a brief overview of the history of education and information literacy in Afghanistan. Second, a section identifies those existing positive elements of Afghanistan's society that should be retained and strengthened as integral parts of a new educational vision, and a reformed educational sector to meet the challenges of the future. Third, a section identifies the key institutions in Afghanistan that must have a strong role to play in reforms. Fourth, a section identifies recommendations the author makes to reform education in the country, including the role of information literacy in this reformation. Fifth, a brief prologue summarizes the key points made in the paper.

## **1. EDUCATION AND INFORMATION LITERACY IN AFGANISTAN—BRIEF HISTORY**

Madrasahs is the name of the traditional centres of learning in Afghanistan, and they have been established all over the country. The Madrasah is a private institution, invariably located near a mosque. Their upkeep was the responsibility of the local

population, not the national government. Traditionally, imparted knowledge provided by the teachers at the Madrassas was related primarily to Islamic jurisprudence, Quranic interpretation, and the tradition of the Prophet (BUPH), including philosophy and theology.

During the early periods of the Islamic civilization, the Madrassas were open to new ideas and contributed a great deal to the sciences and the arts. However, during later periods the focus of religious leaders turned mainly to traditional religious studies, often adopting a rather hostile or condescending attitude towards science and philosophy.

During the Soviet presence in Afghanistan (1979-1992), educational programmes provided by the Kabul government included the teaching of Russian language from primary school to the university, replacing English and French. The college curriculum included Principles of Marxism, Political economy, Dialectical Materialism, History, the (Communist) Party, and related subjects. On the other hand, the Islamist groups in areas under their control, and those in exile, provided a curriculum more related to religious aspects in order to strengthen the objectives of the Jihad (holy war).

Afghanistan is a country where there is no proper system of information literacy. There are a number of libraries in universities, in communities, and in schools that are supported by the government or humanitarian agencies (e.g. UN agencies and non-governmental organizations or NGOs). However, information resources available in those organizations and institutions is not properly and efficiently catalogued, organized, shelved, and bibliographically controlled. Some institutions, like public libraries, use integrated manual card catalogue systems, but others catalogue and shelf information under non-standard sectoral headings. Additionally, private institutions such as the NGOs most often use their own unique methods of recording and retrieving the information they hold, based on subject matter subdivisions that are traditionally of most interest to them. The result has been a kind of bibliographic chaos, and some of the country's information centres have been completely decimated in past decades by factional fighting over what are essentially technical bibliographic control matters. It is no wonder that information literacy has not been able to survive, much less flourish, under these conditions.

## **2. THE CURRENT ASSETS OF AFGHANISTAN'S SOCIETY THAT SHOULD BE RETAINED AND STRENGTHENED**

- 2.1. Perhaps the strongest "building block" which exists and which can provide a strong foundation for reforming Afghan education are the Afghan children themselves, who are eager to take advantage of modern educational opportunities. There is a thirst for education in Afghanistan just as there is in most countries in the world. Despite strong pressures to force the children to stay on the land, or in factories, to help earn a living for their families, there is still an unquenchable thirst for education amongst Afghan children.
- 2.2. An increasingly positive attitude of Afghans toward education, particularly for girls, is also a strong current asset that should be exploited. Also there is

increasing religious and cultural support for local education. Afghans are eager to take advantage of educational services and opportunities that are seen to benefit them and their families at the personal level, politically, economically, and socio-culturally.

- 2.3. Committed Afghan professionals inside Afghanistan, in neighbouring countries such as Pakistan and Iran, and around the world, have expressed a keen willingness to work to rebuild the country. In the United States, and in Europe, for example, many emigrant Afghans who have lived and worked outside of Afghanistan for many years, even decades, are returning to the country so that they can play a role in helping to rebuild its key physical and social infrastructures, including the educational infrastructure.
- 2.4. Organisations with experience providing education to Afghan children have a key role to play. For example, numerous Afghan NGOs, community-based organisation, international institutions including the various UN organisations, have provided education services in Afghan refugee villages (camps/communities) and inside Afghanistan for many years. Much practical knowledge relating to education, and to educational technologies and their application, already exists and can be utilised for future educational programming, rather than re-invented and brought in.
- 2.5. Interpersonal, inter-institutional, and inter-group relationships have been formed and have been successfully utilized between key institutions, both public and private, in many areas in the country. These include working relationships among UN agencies, NGOs, and local communities. Since trust is a key to success and usually can only be earned over a long period of time, this asset will certainly count importantly.
- 2.6. Many Afghans in neighbouring countries (e.g. Pakistan and Iran) own and operate Internet centres. These Afghans have expressed a willingness to extend and then continue their businesses in Afghanistan as soon as the situation improves.

In sum, there are many strengths which Afghanistan has that should be retained and strengthened. It is not a case of "starting from scratch," or throwing everything out and starting all over again. Many lessons have been learned over Afghanistan's long history, some of which are positive and can be built upon, others negative and therefore should be avoided in the future.

### **3. WHICH ARE THE KEY INSTITUTIONS THAT MUST PLAY A STRATEGIC ROLE IN REFORMING AFGHANISTAN'S EDUCATIONAL SECTOR?**

- 3.1. **The ACBAR Resource and Information Centre (ARIC)** is one of the most comprehensive resource centres for information on Afghanistan. ARIC was established in 1989 by the ACBAR (Agency Coordinating Body for Afghan Relief) membership as a semi-autonomous body to collect and disseminate documentation on NGO activities and to provide basic reference materials on

Afghanistan for the NGO community. Since its establishment, ARIC has responded to other needs of the Afghan society that became apparent as the prolonged conflict resulted in extensive damages to the cultural heritage. With the cultural heritage already diminished through massive looting and pillaging, the society was rocked by the introduction of alien ideologies that sought to dilute or even wipe out the past. In addition, two generations of Afghans born in exile are growing up without knowledge of their heritage, in refugee camps and in countries of resettlement. The Afghan identity is therefore not only being eroded but is in danger of being extinguished.

Currently ARIC has over 10,000-catalogued titles. New documents are received daily. The bulk of these collections consist of Dari, Pashtu, and foreign language documents generated by NGOs, the UN agencies, and all bilateral and multilateral organizations active in Afghanistan. These include books published by agencies, their reports, surveys, maps, newsletters, periodicals, newspaper clippings, posters and other ephemera. The Archives component contains documents relating to development activities before 1991. A number of these date back 50 years.

ARIC has been the first ever library to introduce the information literacy approach for Afghan refugees in Pakistan and other interested individuals around the globe. ARIC launched its Web site ([www.afghanresources.org](http://www.afghanresources.org)) in August 2000. The Web site has complete catalogue of the ARIC holdings with a search engine facility. ARIC is currently exploring options to establish links with other relevant organisations on the Web site. We believe that the new dimension on the Web site will encourage our users to search for their required information on the Internet.

- 3.2. **Government Libraries in Afghanistan** – There are a number of public libraries run by the government at national and provincial levels. It is important to mention that many of the provincial libraries closed or functioned only marginally because of the widespread civil disturbances. These institutions have acquired no or very few acquisitions since the 1960s. None are provided with electronic facilities. The principal public libraries currently operational include:

**National Library, Kabul** was established in 1924 in Kabul. However, the library was looted and many fine folios were destroyed in 1929 during a civil war. A new public library was opened in 1933. The Kabul public library today houses some 30,000 titles. The collection includes Persian and Arabic works, English section, the commodious Afghan Studies section and the periodical section. In Kabul, of the five local branches, two were shut down completely in 1993, two others were evacuated since the premises belonged to the private sector in 2001 and one other remained is functional to date.

**The Kabul University Library** holdings amount to about 150,000 books and 6000 periodicals. However this library was affected most disastrously in the aftermath of civil war during the 1990s.

**The Herat Public Library** is comparatively efficiently organised and all books are shelved. However there is no central catalogue or any kind of inventory.

**The Public Library in Jalalabad, Nangarhar Province** in 1999 held some one thousand antiquated volumes in the Dari and Pashtu languages, and bound collections of newspapers.

**The Medical College Library in Jalalabad in 1993** held some 2000 titles in a deplorable condition, hopelessly out of date and largely in English.

**Nangarhar Islamic Library** in Jalalabad had at last count about 18,000 books and monographs and 8,000 periodicals.

3.3. **Other institutions** including secondary and high schools, and all government ministries have established and maintained libraries for several years now. However, most are in considerable disarray and therefore they must be rebuilt and their collections substantially refreshed before they can play the kind of role envisioned in this paper.

#### 4. RECOMMENDATIONS

The latest technologies enable researchers as well as interested individuals to download most of their required information from the Internet. If we look back to history, it is obvious that there have been methods of information exchange: 1) manuscripts, typescripts, handwritten notes and hardcopies, 2) softcopies of any information on the computer or floppy disk and 3) variety of information on the Internet. Afghanistan, compared to the rest of the world, is still somewhere in the first method of information sharing. Anyone requiring information about an issue has one option which is refer to library and extract it from among tens of hundreds of documents piled up there. It seems practical that Afghanistan jump one step ahead by introducing the information literacy approach.

The key elements contained in all of these recommendations must be synthesized and integrated into an overall national educational reform programme, and concrete and specific action steps identified, phased into short, medium, and long-term timetables, and with responsibility for each step clearly identified, and the roles of all of the players who must be involved spelled out (both internal and external). The needs for an overall national educational reform programme are:

- 4.1. There is a pressing need for a common Afghan vision and goals for the educational sector. One might even consider this to be the most strategic of all of the lessons learned, and the one that would be the most serious barrier were it not addressed as a priority policy issue by the new Afghan government. The act of creating a vision would, in and of itself, be a national unifying experience for Afghans, requiring an attitude of tolerance and cooperation, virtues that are now in limited supply.

- 4.2. There is a need for strong national advocacy to ensure education a place on the resource agenda. A national champion is needed to explain, defend, and justify the importance of the educational sector to the new nation-building process at a time when the demands on the country's limited financial, human, and other resources is very heavy. Although a pivotal sector traditionally, Afghan education has not received sufficient attention in the past periods of crisis and change. That attitude must change in the new context.
- 4.3. There is a need for long-term commitment to Afghan education by the resource-generating international community. In particular, I am speaking about foundations, wealthy private individuals, and international funding institutions, which support education. In the country, past neglect of the education sector has exacerbated many of the current problems, in no small measure because public policy-makers have not seen the direct linkage between education and the alleviation of political, social, and cultural problems.
- 4.4. There is a need for a policy recognising education as the right of every Afghan child. Within this policy framework, the delivery of education and the context in which it takes place can vary depending upon the needs of parents and children in local communities. Policies concerning girls' education need to be especially sensitive to cultural expectations, or they may limit rather than encourage participation.
- 4.5. There is a need for more school buildings and the rehabilitation of the existing educational physical infrastructure—including laboratories and libraries. This is very important in the long-term, although the immediate need is for quality programs, flexible delivery systems and effective institutional development and management. However, the country cannot afford to wait until those initiatives are all underway. It must begin now to strengthen the physical infrastructure because the lead times for design and construction are great.
- 4.5. There is a need to address special education requirements. Many children have been disabled during the conflict. Others have physical, mental and learning disabilities that require special attention. Demobilising youth is another category requiring special attention.
- 4.6. There is a need to address the efficiency issue of high dropout among educational institutions. The present inadequacies in the quality of most programmes neither teaches students academic skills nor provides them with information relevant to their daily lives. The absence of nearby higher stages of education causes some parents not to enrol their children at all or to withdraw them early. If access to extended education were easier and the content of programmes better fit parent expectations, they would be more likely to send children to school and keep them there longer.
- 4.7. There is a need to develop strong linkages between education authorities, aid agencies, and communities. As part of this it is important to identify and clearly define the roles government, UN agencies, NGOs, communities, and private and

public entities can play in the provision of education services. Each needs to be given space to contribute in ways that are most appropriate.

4.8. There is a need for sound policies and plans to address key educational issues. At present there is little capacity for policy formulation and planning at the national level. The needs include:

- Developing a proper and realistic policy as well as financial plan to address the problems of chronic under-funding of education, the need to find and expand revenues, and the importance of keeping costs low for children;
- Building human resource capability to manage the education system including information literacy; and
- Introducing information literacy as a tool for tracing required information on the Internet.

4.9. There is a need to recognise the important role of teachers and their development in the information literacy system through:

- Providing adequate salaries to attract appropriate candidates and incentives such as accommodation to encourage teachers to accept appointments;
- Provide training opportunities for upgrading teachers' knowledge, methodologies and other capacities in pre-services and particularly in-service training;
- Providing training for information literacy, which is practically nonexistent.

4.10. There is a need to develop quality textbooks and supplementary materials. These materials need to be based on the goals and objectives of a reformed national curriculum. They need to address the specific learning skills outlined by the curriculum, provide clearly defined learning goals, and include life skills based on content that is relevant to Afghan children's lives. They need to be user-friendly and supportive of teachers in various environments.

4.11. There is a need to improve telecommunication systems and networks to establish efficient and effective and dependable online connection services to Internet users in the various institutions that have key roles to play: including the schools, the libraries, the government agencies (especially at the local and provincial levels), the NGO's, and others.

4.12. There is a need to restore the electricity systems throughout the country, particularly in urban areas.

4.13. There is a need to activate ISP servers for Afghanistan to speed up Internet browsing. Currently humanitarian organisations inside Afghanistan are using Pakistan and/or other countries servers through satellite phones, which is very expensive.

- 4.14. There is a need to build linguistic (primarily English) skills of Afghans, since most of the information available on the Internet is in English, nor at least not in Afghan dialects. However, gradually an indigenous Afghan language capability should be encouraged and developed, in Arabic, in Dari, in Pashtu, and in other dialects.

## 5. PROLOGUE

Afghanistan is a nation that has been almost continuously torn by strife since its birth, both internally and externally instigated. The country is a poor country and its economy is still agrarian, and pre-industrially based. The wonder is that a core national spirit could even survive under such circumstances. However the will and determination of the people is very strong, and like all nations the country does not wish to just survive, but to prosper and improve the quality of life despite the formidable barriers that are challenging it. Education and information literacy are destined to play a key role in the future of the country. The nation's new leaders at all levels, in Kabul, in the provinces, and at the village level, understand this. What remains to be done is to find a champion to create a new vision for the educational sector. Information literacy must be regarded as a critical success factor in this equation.

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